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**COVID-19 AND THE FUTURE OF MULTILATERALISM:
A EUROPEAN CHALLENGE**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic represents both a challenge and an opportunity for Europe to show global leadership and to broadly display its international responsibility. To tackle the multi-dimensional challenges of this time, Europe needs to join efforts with like-minded members of the international community to revitalize the Post World War Two international system. A key forum where to take together the international actors is a reformed World Trade Organization (WTO). This institution may represent a strategic place where to strengthen relationships with new and old global partners and to share key democratic values. At the same time, Europe must stop thinking and acting as a ‘fragmented power’ and present itself as a united block that coherently acts to coordinate internal and external policies. Some concrete steps to move towards a European strategic autonomy encompassing technological, energy and educational aspects are discussed in the paper.

Short bio

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

- AI* – Artificial intelligence

- EU* – European Union

- FTAs* – Free Trade Agreements

- G20* – Group of Twenty, brings together the world’s 20 major economies

- IMF* – International Monetary Fund

- IPAs*– Investment Protection Agreements

- OECD* – Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

- UN* – United Nations

- US* – United States

- WB* – World Bank

- WTO* – World Trade Organization

- WWII* – World War II

- SDGs*– Sustainable Development Goals

1. INTRODUCTION

In the next future, Europe is called to strive for keeping its credibility as a geopolitical power at the world level and for preserving the existing multilateral rules-based order. The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic represents both a challenge and an opportunity for Europe to show global leadership and to broadly display its international responsibility. In this context, soft power might represent a precious resource for Europe to project its values and defend its interests onto the global stage, without relying on force or coercion (Nye, 1990). This is even more necessary if considering the growing waves of nationalism and protectionism in the world that are amplified by the harsh war-trade confrontation between two superpowers as China and the US. At the same time, the promotion and protection of the multilateral rules-based order is a necessity for Europe to strengthen its responsible global leadership, reputation, and credibility (Jonathan, 2019). Multilateralism lies at the core of the liberal world order of the post-WWII period and it can be considered as a foreign policy practice used by “three or more actors engaging in voluntary and (essentially) institutionalized international cooperation governed by norms and principles, with rules that apply (by and large) equally to all states” to face international problems (Lazarou, 2017: p.2). The current crisis has exacerbated the inadequacy of multilateral institutions, highlighting the need for more global coordination and cooperation. To promote an updated vision of the international order, the EU has a wide range of instruments and multiple pathways to undertake. The first part of this paper will discuss how international organizations can be reshaped while defending and reinforcing the commitment to global multilateralism. The second part will analyze three main possible effective strategies to exert and reinforce the European geopolitical role: technological advancement, energy independence, and the internationalization of higher education. The conclusion will provide some final considerations and recommendations to inform future policy discussion(s).

2. THE EUROPEAN ROLE IN RESHAPING INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

Since the end of the Second World War, the United Nations (UN) has been the maximum expression of multilateralism, but its position has been dramatically weakened in the last decades. This has become even more evident since the election of Donald Trump (2016-2020) in the US, who has drastically enhanced its slogan ‘America first’ by becoming a brake, more than a “motor”, for multilateral cooperation.

In this precarious context, the World Trade Organization (WTO) has the potential to be the forum to coordinate global responses to the pandemic and the post-recovery period (IAI, 2020). This organization has provided the basis for the rapid growth of economies around the world and it is indispensable for ensuring future free and fair trade. However, the WTO needs a new framework where members are not competitors, but their interests are mutually reinforcing each other (UNCTAD, 2020). According to this, the EU needs to collaborate with partners around the world in order to advance proposals that progressively widen spaces for global development and benefit all the actors involved. This implies removing or limiting trade barriers for some goods (e.g. to medical supplies, medicines, and food) (IAI, 2020), especially because of the counterproductive effects on the developing countries. On the other hand, it is necessary to open the way to a virtuous cycle of increased productive investments and rules for fair and balanced trade (UNCTAD, 2020; Ugaz and Sun, 2020).

Furthermore, the European Union should lead the efforts to reform the WTO in relation to two main points: the renovation of WTO Dispute Settlement Mechanism and the issue of subsidies' distortion in the international trade system (Leonard, Pisani-Ferry and Ribakova, 2019; DIGITALEUROPE, 2020). According to the latter point, single countries have no legal instruments to respond to third parties' infringements of national sovereignty and its essential security interests. This is because the notification of subsidies is often not fully transparent and its efficacy limited, making the remedial action slow and complex (Dworkin and Leonard, 2018; Hobbs, 2020).

Besides this, the WTO dispute settlement mechanism does not prevent such violations and it does not account for third parties' rapid deployment of economic coercion measures. The situation has further been worsened by the block of the appointments of the Appellate Body, that no longer guarantees an outcome on countries' litigation, because of the mercantilist and protectionist agenda of the United States (Fitzgerald, 2020). As a reaction to US impasse, a much broader and higher-level of political intervention and involvement, by different players, are needed (Ismail, 2020, Hoekman and Puccio, 2019). To do this Europe might adopt new Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) and Investment Protection Agreements (IPAs) that could permit to: remove barriers; create transparency; require reciprocity; support the creation of a global level playing field and advance the global agenda (Kwa, Rosales and Lunenborg, 2020; DIGITALEUROPE, 2020). A special effort should be aimed to implement new connections with Asia – the most dynamic region in the global economy – and Africa – a continent linked to Europe by its historical and cultural ties- since both represent future economic growth poles. At the same time, Europe must be able to keep the traditional links with its main big partners such as the US, China, and Russia that still play a fundamental role in the EU development.

Nevertheless, this strategy should not only be limited to the ratification of the trade agreements, but should also integrate the WTO into the UN system from a functional point of view (Economic and Committee, 2020). In other words, initiatives and other economic solutions should be developed in conjunction with other important institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (WB), the Group of Twenty (G20), and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (Brugner and Schuch, 2020; Koenig and Stahl, 2020). The main goal is to fully support the developing countries with the necessary assistance and the flexibility they might need. This would not mean to provide illimited financial and economic resources under any conditions but, on the contrary, to make these actions conditional to the respect for EU values (e.g. respect for human rights) and foreign policy priorities (e.g. sustainable development) (Von der Leyen, 2019; Scazzieri, 2020). According to this, the United Nations Charter and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) might be the milestone sources to establish a minimum set of ethical and moral shared objectives¹.

3. THREE WAYS TO STRENGTHEN MULTILATERALISM

The multifaceted challenges, the EU is facing to remain an influential geopolitical actor and to display international responsibility, call for a redefinition of its internal and external strategy. On the one hand, effective cooperation at the European level is fundamental to strengthen global

¹ These should range from achieving peace and stability in all regions of the world, to guarantee justice and human rights, other than promoting social and economic development to achieve the greatest prosperity for the global society.

governance mechanisms and to ensure its strategic autonomy² (Belli et al., 2017). On the other hand, a truly geopolitical approach should first and foremost focus on finding new solutions to enhance EU foreign policy and to share its liberal and democratic values. Three main ways to achieve these purposes are explored in the following part of the paper: technological advancement, energy independence and higher education. These domains might be particularly useful to strengthen solidarity and social cohesion, creating jobs and reducing inequality, and to accelerate the transition towards a climate-neutral economy. In this way, Europe might privilege the use of soft power while, at the same time, increasing multilateralism at both the regional and the global level.

3.1 TECHNOLOGICAL ADVANCEMENT

The new era of geopolitical competition between the US and China is an incentive for Europe to develop its digital capabilities. The EU and its member states need to develop their own capacities in key digital emerging technologies whether they want to preserve the capacity to act in the world (Darnis, 2020; Hobbs, 2020; IAI, 2020).

In an open and interconnected economy, the ability to control digital technologies also implies to shape economic, social, and political developments (European Political Strategy Centre, 2019). The Covid-19 pandemic is additionally presenting itself as an opportunity to rebuild countries' economies by putting digitalization first in line with their existing goals and plans. This is fundamental to step up the competitiveness of the European high-tech sector and mitigate factors that are undermining its strategic autonomy³ (Figure 1). In this view, Europe should avoid lagging behind in areas such as 5G technology, AI (Artificial Intelligence) start-ups, data-driven applications, and quantum computing (Blackman and Forge, 2019; European Political Strategy Centre, 2019). A few words need to be spent on the 5G technology since this network will be the foundation for future industrial advancement and the backbone of a wide range of essential societal services (Blackman and Forge, 2019). Unlike its predecessors, the 5G is designed to handle massive numbers of devices, high-data rates, and applications that require very fast and reliable communications with minimal latency.

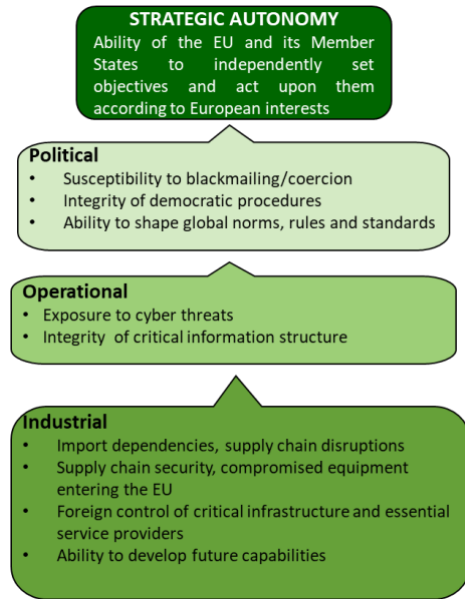
Digital technologies are vital elements of the European Single Market because they contribute to:

- ❖ the successful digital transformation of businesses and business models of European companies;
- ❖ the sustained growth of the global economy, creation of jobs, and the ability of companies to innovate in Europe;
- ❖ the right levers to drive a digitally enabled Green Deal, and the future competitiveness of Europe in global markets (DIGITALEUROPE, 2020).

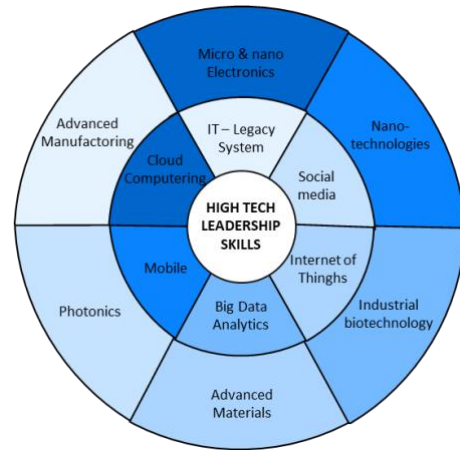
² Anghel et. al. (2020) define 'strategic autonomy' as “the ability to act autonomously as well as to choose when, in which area, and if, to act with like-minded partners “ (p.3). This implies both the ability to decide and to implement decisions in an autonomous manner but, also, the capacity to cooperate with partners in a multilateral setting with the aim to reduce existing external dependencies.

³ The European Political Strategy Centre (2019) refers to industrial, operational and political autonomy dimensions. to assess how digital technologies are affecting Europe's strategic autonomy.

Figure 1: Digital technologies affect all elements of strategic autonomy



Source: European Political Strategy Centre



Source: Adapted from European Commission (2017)

In a long-term period, the interdependent connectivity of future digital and technological systems might drastically transform diplomatic and geopolitical relations. The EU should work to amplify digital connections with other key digital countries such as the UK, India, Japan, the Republic of Korea, Russia, Singapore, and Taiwan. In this way, it can take advantage of its various strengths (highly educated population, strong research institutions, and single market) and, at the same time, it can boost its industrial competitiveness (through innovation, access to finance, structural reforms).

However, in the short-term one of the most important challenges for Europe will be to position itself in the US-China tech confrontation. On the one hand, the EU is China's number one trading partner and its key export market, other than being the main source of technological know-how and a valuable platform for direct investments. European and Chinese companies trade, compete and cooperate around the world while benefiting from investments in each other's markets (Huotari, Weidenfeld and Wessling, 2020). In the future, according to the Chinese growing demand for technology and its limited access to the US market, these links need to be reinforced. On the other hand, the United States remains the EU's key strategic partner and ally. Since the end of the Second World War, the transatlantic relationship has been based on common values and on mutually beneficial objectives that allowed joint interests, stability, and prosperity. This relationship might be used to tackle the challenges⁴ (e.g. the protection of the privacy) posed by digitalization preserving the democratic and libertarian values, such as the respect for human rights and international law, that have historically characterized the two superpowers in analysis (Huotari, Weidenfeld and Wessling, 2020; Hackenbroich et al., 2020). All things considered, the

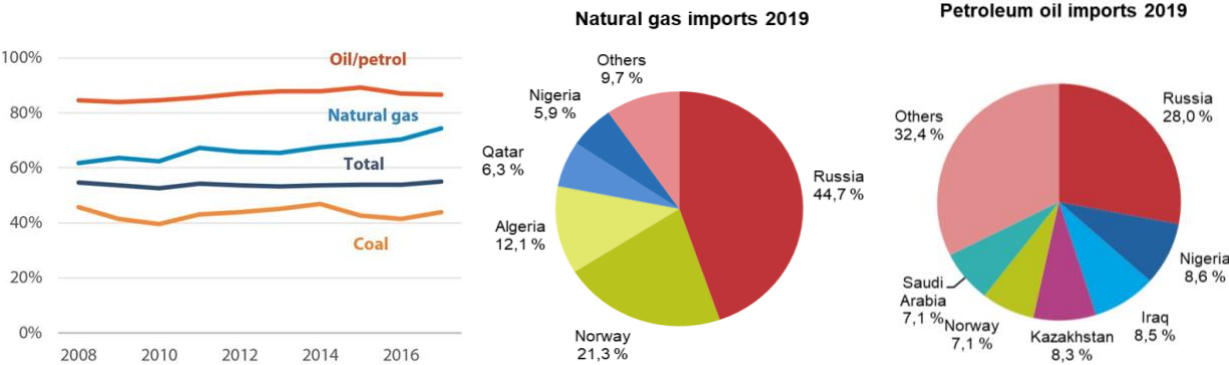
⁴ Other threats are represented by a fragile normative framework for the development of the internet, cybersecurity, data governance and the protection of privacy, and the impact of artificial intelligence (AI), a renewed and reinforced transatlantic relationship is essential (IAI, 2020).

European community needs to level-up its support for the multistakeholder model at the global level with a strong alignment in values and interests on new and traditional challenges.

3.2 ENERGY INDEPENDENCE

The network of the European energy interdependencies is very complex connecting consumers and producers of different areas of the world through many energy corridors. European countries do not have enough resources of their own to cover the needs of the society, and so they highly depend on foreign energy supplies. Nowadays, imports are concentrated among relatively few external partners, with Russia that continues to be one of the main suppliers of gas and oil (Figure 2) (Russel, 2020).

Figure 2: EU energy dependence (% of EU energy consumption covered by imports)



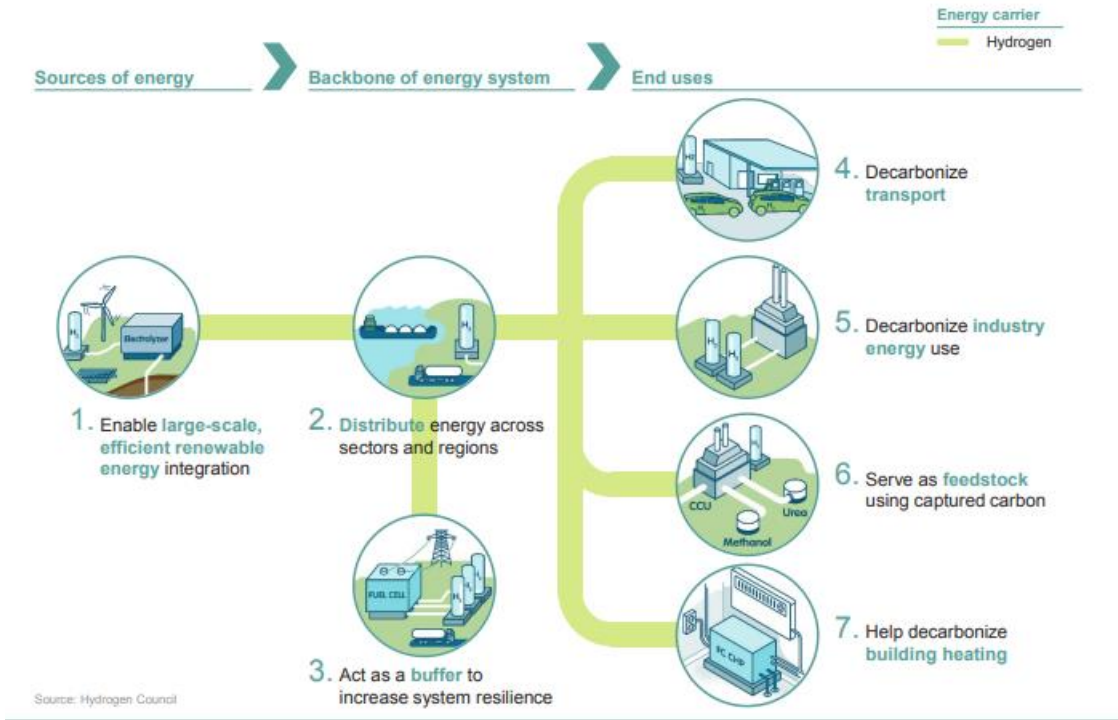
Source: Eurostat database (Comext) and Eurostat estimates

Dependence on energy imports remains one of the EU’s main external vulnerabilities and it is a fertile land for other international actors to exert their geopolitical power. This weakness may be also linked to the fact that European countries have traditionally impeded pan-European solutions to energy security problems while preferring to lead energy policy at the national level (Pedersen, 2014). Only recently, the UE promoted a coordinated and multilateral strategy approach by its Member States to support international frameworks for energy relations, such as the International Energy Agency and the Energy Charter (Russell, 2020). These efforts are aimed to boost the EU’s energy external actions in order to improve fossil energy governance and to promote the use of renewable resources. The rise of renewables allows Europe to produce new clean energy and to deploy a less geopolitical and more cooperative international framework for energy relations. In this view, the Paris Agreement and the European New Green Deal may be considered as the main sources to accomplish the European targets of sustainable development and energy transition. Furthermore, the current situation of the health crisis is a unique opportunity to link short-term emergency measures to a long-term policy strategy (OIES, 2020). This is due to the fact, the Covid-19 pandemic has drastically triggered a reorganization of the economy. The recent

circumstances, together with the fast digitalization and informatization of the economy, might call for a new availability of energy to be satisfied. In this context, electricity and hydrogen might become two important factors for the European agenda. These might permit to extend green-recovery strategies and create new connections between the Old Continent, Asia, and North Africa (De Blasio and Pflugmann, 2020).

The future necessity to build up and develop regional electric infrastructures will permit several countries to increasingly become interdependent, and, in turn, reduce the risk of geopolitical tensions (De Blasio and Pflugmann, 2020). In this carbon-free energy puzzle, hydrogen has the potential to improve the economic efficiency of renewable investments (Figure 3), enhance the security of power supply, and serve as a carbon-free seasonal storage. The efforts to establish renewable hydrogen production facilities and widespread transportation infrastructure might require a new coordination both between and within countries (Hydrogen Council, 2017; Blázquez, Fuentes-Bracamontes and Manzano-Gonzalez, 2019; OIES, 2020). In this way, electricity and hydrogen might become the pillars of a new European Agenda by achieving a twofold purpose: the fight against climate change and the lowering of geopolitical tensions.

Figure 3: Hydrogen has several roles in decarbonizing major sectors of the economy



3.3 HIGHER EDUCATION

Since the early nineties, education, especially higher education, has been seen as a major tool of soft power (Nye, 2009). In a globalized world, all countries aim to empower their global

positioning as well as to create favorable conditions for their long-term socio-economic development. Internationalization of higher education might influence the global political agenda and the future geopolitical goals of a nation (Botonero, 2013). This is because, international students promote intercultural relationships, contribute to local economies and might be employed as highly qualified workers.

Besides these advantages, higher education might link internal necessities to countries' foreign policies. First, the ideas that originate in higher education institutions can influence the perceptions of students who may eventually become business, government, or civil society leaders of the future (Botonero, 2013). Second, the internationalization of higher education programs might contribute to socio-economic development and to the creation of long-term strategic links (European Commission, 2013). Third, higher education can play a crucial role in reducing poverty and ensuring security in a region.

Europe has a strong base on which to build its global political agenda, due to the other countries' positive perception of its higher education programs (e.g. the Erasmus for studies program). According to this, a strategic extension of the Erasmus scheme and similar programs offers the EU an effective platform to make participants aware of its values (Abels *et al.*, 2020). This also means fostering cooperation with third countries to improve the sustainable development of human resources and to promote dialogue and understanding between peoples and cultures (Vandewalle, 2015).

On top of this, the challenge is to export the "brand Europe" to exploit the advantages of its historical and cultural heritage. A fundamental role might be played by social media and digital platforms that are known to facilitate communication, supporting the new transnational connections (Hänska and Bauchowitz, 2019). These tools may be used to:

- reach large audiences;
- simplify the access of talented future students;
- deliver useful information about the institution;
- strengthen student-to-student interaction, student engagement, and involvement in campus life (Motta and Barbosa, 2019).

The emergency situation due to the Covid-19 pandemic has further contributed to highlight the under-exploited potential of digital technologies, bringing the European Union to increase its efforts to secure inclusive, equal and up-to-date educational systems (Bassot, 2020). Rethinking education in the digital age might represent a prerequisite for Europe's future global competitiveness (Braun *et al.*, 2020).

4. CONCLUDING REMARKS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The task to carry out is anything but simple, even though the Covid-19 crisis represents a unique opportunity to shape the European geopolitical profile. To tackle the multi-dimensional challenges of this time, a shared and coherent effort is required to build up a global coalition of allies.

On the one hand, Europe needs to join efforts with like-minded members of the international community to revitalize the Post World War Two international system. A key forum, to take together all these actors, is an updated World Trade Organization. This institution needs to take

into account different perspectives and priorities across its members, but especially needs to be flexible, resilient and responsive to new economic scenarios.

On the other hand, Europe needs a change of mindset to stop thinking and acting as a ‘fragmented power’ while, instead, presenting itself as a united block. Concrete steps should be made to boost a new strategic autonomy that encompasses technological, energy and educational aspects. An open approach to technology creates new opportunities to compete at the frontier of technological development and improve the autonomy of Europe and its myriad of firms. Energy, at the same time, is an important component to strengthen and expand multilateral cooperation, especially through the use of renewables. Last, but not least, Europe’s higher education is key to deliver the knowledge requirements for economic development and to create new spaces for collaboration among countries. To conclude, the following *recommendations* are intended to improve the architecture of a new multilateral system:

Recommendation 1: Strengthening the role of the WTO

- Reform the WTO implies an open and collaborative transatlantic dialogue by updating and establishing new relations with African and Asian partners in terms of investment, trade, official development aid and security. Besides this, a key priority should be to update the Dispute Settlement Mechanism. A solution might be to refer to ad-hoc panels composed of retired WTO judges or, in the alternative, to committees made up of member states.
- At the WTO, the EU should work to tackle trade-distorting practices, which lead to an uneven playing field, unfair competition, and increasing challenges for Europe. To accomplish this goal, the EU should expand its own regulatory practices to the rest of the world. This should include engaging with China in the spirit of “pragmatism” and, at the same time, find new ways to enhance its historical and cultural alliance with the US.

Recommendation 2: Achieving European high-tech leadership

- The EU should take a leading role in developing digital solutions for its members and simultaneously enhancing digital connections with other global regions. To do this, it should accelerate investments in high fast connectivity, such as extensive 5G (and future 6G) networks.
- Europe must favour national and regional long-term strategic plans to foster the development of local industries focusing on new technologies such as: cyber, super and quantum computing, quantum communication and blockchain.

Recommendation 3: Enhancing Energy Independence

- The EU should support its members, neighbors and energy partners to work more closely within the Energy Community. The aim is to encourage dominant suppliers to adhere to

fair market competition rules and to increase cooperation. Behind this, the EU should support the creation of an energy dialogue platform that brings to the table different energy stakeholders, with the final goal to integrate energy and climate governance.

- The EU should spearhead the efforts for a costless and secure energy transition to a low carbon economy based on renewable energy. To do this, it should work to develop new electricity interconnections and to encourage the early deployment of hydrogen solutions, especially by incentivizing public and private-sector investments.

Recommendation 4: Promoting the European Education Brand

- Promote mobility schemes to integrate more-developed and less-developed regions in the world. The European Commission should pass an extended post-study work visa and it should implement other measures to ensure its visa offer is competitive (e.g. granting scholarships to students and to university staff members to carry out studies, research, teaching, and training assignments abroad).
- To internationalise higher education, Europe should pay more attention to: remove the barriers that impede the further development of joint degrees; develop innovative models of digital and blended learning (virtual visits and virtual testings to artistic, cultural, historical, or scientific institutions); stimulate bilingual and multilingual learning at different levels of education (primary, secondary, vocational and adult education).

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